


2-1-1979

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Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "State-Supported Urban Policy Vital for Rhode Island" (1979). *Smolski Texts*. 123.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/123

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State-supported urban policy vital for Rhode Island

Chester Smolski

For the first time in this country's history there is now a national urban policy, a statement of objectives that need to be implemented if this nation's cities are to survive and subsequently prosper.

It was in a campaign pledge in June of 1976 made before the United States Conference of Mayors that President Carter referred to the process of inner city decay which could spread unchecked throughout our society. To prevent this eventuality, he cited the necessity for a federal mandate in which objectives and direction for city revitalization were clearly stated.

Three months after assuming office in January of 1977, the President appointed an interagency body, the Urban and Regional Policy Group, to study the matter and to recommend an urban policy. Over the next year, with hearings held throughout the country and in Washington, thousands of citizens expressed their views on urban problems and the means necessary to correct them. The results of this extensive dialogue and study were announced one year later, in March of 1978, by the President as "A New Partnership to Conserve American Communities." This National Urban Policy is a recognition of the importance of our cities by government and the course of action that should be pursued to "give us cities worthy of the greatest nation on earth."

The nine objectives given in this Urban Policy stress the idea of partnership between various levels of government, between public and private sectors, and between private voluntary and neighborhood organizations. One of these objectives, that of state and city cooperation, should be carefully considered here in Rhode Island if our own cities are to meet the challenge of revitalization.

"Encourage states to become partners in assisting urban areas" is the way this objective is stated. The federal government acknowledges that it (1) must give state governments the major role in defining and carrying out national urban policy and (2) provide funding to those states which implement policies to help distressed cities.

Some progressive states have already recognized the obligation they have to their cities. Minnesota is a leader with its programs designed to guide urban development and redevelopment through its Metropolitan Council of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Subsequently, all encompassing, comprehensive urban policies have been defined in Massachusetts, under former Governor Dukakis, and in Michigan and California, with similar policies being considered in Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

With federal leadership directed toward an urban policy and with several states already having an urban policy in place or at least studying the question, it

is ironic and perhaps indicative of a lack of leadership that in this state where nine of ten Rhode Islanders are classed as urban residents, there is no such state policy, none is under study and none is contemplated.

It is difficult to understand why such a small state, the size of a county in other parts of the country, cannot come up with a comprehensive plan for total state development, whether one talks of land use management (turned down by the General Assembly three times) of an urban development guide or strategy. And it is paradoxical that the state legislative body which sits in our largest city and whose leader lives here provides so little help to our capital city because of what they ostensibly perceive as city functions rather than state responsibilities.

Consider some recent cases. The Providence Public Library, desperately in need of funds to prevent reduced services, will receive an extra \$160,000 from the city. The nearly \$1 million of city money contrasts with the less than \$400,000 of state money. Yet nearly one-half of the library card holders live outside the city. The library is really a Rhode Island public library that happens to be located in Providence and for which the city assumes the greater responsibility.

Another example is the purchase of the Ocean State Performing Arts Center toward which the state contributed \$200,000 through the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission to match the same amount from the private sector while the city contributed \$270,000. Contrast this with the state of Delaware when, faced with a similar restoration of an old theatre for an arts center, contributed \$1 million while the city of Wilmington paid \$100,000. The Ocean State will really be a state arts center in Providence.

Finally, the Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau receives \$10,000 from the state, \$30,000 from the city and \$40,000 from the private sector. While helping area businesses, the convention of Charismatics held at the Civic Center on one weekend in November also returned over \$60,000 in taxes to the state from the more than \$1 million they spent while here.

Whether a library, a theatre or a convention bureau, all of which happen to be located in our major city, their various activities help satisfy a state need, yet the state does not provide adequate support for such functions.

Perhaps it is an anti-urban bias or perhaps it is a lack of vision, but whatever the reason the thinking of the state government must be changed. We need an urban policy for all of the urban centers in Rhode Island, with special attention given to our capital city because of its uniqueness in this small state. Such a plan of action will not only benefit our cities but will also help the state.

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